

The Barcelona regional plan

Tim Marshall

Felicitats! This is my main message, not I hope at a shallow level, but with deep appreciation of the achievement of this plan. Had I been commenting in 2008-2009, I could have reported on the progress made in England, and in different ways in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in developing regional planning skills and results. We could have encouraged each other, compared notes. At that time, the strategies for the eight English regions were coming to a conclusion, rather as was happening in Catalonia, after some years of efforts across the country. Most were finalised in one form or another by the time of the May 2010 general election, though some had legal challenges outstanding, above all in southern England, generally where small areas of urban fringe were designated for development, against the wishes of some local interests. They were carried out in highly collaborative form, led by local authorities and involving wide public participation. A new round of work was underway from 2009, as the government had introduced a new instrument, the Regional Strategy, which was to combine economic planning and spatial (physical) planning – no planning expert knew quite how, but it would have been worked out. There was a great deal wrong with New Labour's approach to planning, especially their inability to resist reforming the system every two or three years, but at least planning at local and regional levels was promoted, as were regeneration programmes, and some environmental prioritiesⁱ. The Regional Spatial Strategies gave good frameworks for lower level planning in most regions.

But - the coalition government formed of Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties immediately moved to abolish all traces of the regional system set up over the previous 20 years (much of it by the pre-1997 Conservative government). So now the only remnants of strategic (above local) planning left in England are the Mayor of London's Plan, now revised for the third time. The Localism Bill due to become law shortly will formalise the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies, and the other elements of the regional system, the Government Offices for the Regions and the Regional Development Agencies, have already largely disappearedⁱⁱ. So very little above the local level is now left in English planning (the situation is much healthier elsewhere in the UK, less affected by this powerful ideological wave of anti-planning). This experience of the last 15 months inevitably colours my reading of the PTMB.

The PTMB is a magnificent planning achievement, reflecting the depth of planning culture and expertise built up in Catalonia over many years. It shows what strong political leadership can do, alongside such expertise. Without that, and without the planning culture which is now widely under threat across Europe, the Plan would not have been possible. The architectural and mapping traditions are shown to powerful effect, with impressive cartographic evidence bases and proposals presentation.

I am not able to judge the detail of the Plan itself. A reading of just part of the voluminous documentation makes clear the impressive and careful logic with which the edifice has been built, but that is not the same as knowing whether the policies and instruments go in the directions necessary to create the necessary "trend break". Of course that rests also on the implementation of the coming years, and that will be

as dependent on powerful political leadership as the creation of the Plan. With a change in control of the Generalitat, it is to be hoped that such committed leadership will be present, at that level, as well as in the rest of the assemblage of key actors responsible for progressing the follow up plans and actions, urbanistically and sectorally. The number of things that have to go right after such a determined intervention can be daunting: there is such a variety of powers and finances that have to be synchronised, to have a fair chance of pushing the whole system towards the states planned for.

It is to be hoped that an English language publication will become available to describe the methods used, so that much more of the wider world can profit from the experience of making this Plan, as well as the accompanying six for the rest of Catalonia. There is much of methodological and substantive interest. The ambitious combination of quantitative modelling of population and jobs, and adjusting this to spatial realities, must be worthy of careful study internationally, in progressing regional planning techniques. Other aspects of innovative practice are in the whole treatment of open spaces and landscapes, based in part on Richard Forman's input. The designation of follow up plans, the PDUs set, is also of interest, reflecting a flexible and hopefully effective way of bridging the "sub-regional gap", which can easily undermine the real force of regional planning in some countries.

I was particularly interested in how the plan deals with other sectoral planning, having recently completed a project on planning major infrastructure in five European states. It appears that reasonably good connections between the specialist planners such as road and rail experts and the regional planners were made, in part because the work in several cases was being done in parallel within the same ministry. The Plan has a central focus on transport infrastructure and largely accepts the transport plans proposals, though argues that it was able to adjust these to physical realities, presumably linked very much to the open space planning. Work on energy, water and waste systems is less evident in the Plan, seen as more peripheral to the focussed priorities addressed. A more radically green plan might have had to take these issues more into its core, but this was doubtless not on the political agenda (at least in the energy case). Revision at some point might tackle the macro dimensions of energy and urbanisation, and perhaps of water efficiency and conservation. That might push more into the territory of energy transitions, alongside the critical socio-economic spatial shifts now at the core of the Plan.

Finally some examples of the many questions raised for an English reader of the Plan:

- What difference does the nature of the territory covered make, its extent and population? The population of this part of Catalonia is about average in English regional terms, with current numbers ranging from 8 million in the South East of England to 2.5 million in the North East. A difficulty in England, in the absence of elected regional government, was how anyone can "converse with" several million people. The presence of articulated democratic structures in Spain means that this is not so critical to legitimacy. But complexity and pressures can make planning tough, when the public instruments available to policy makers are now weaker in most governments. There is a relation between territory planned for, the ambition of challenges

accepted, and the societal equipment for addressing the challenges. Part of the strength of the PTMB may be its relative modesty – time will show.

- Does the level of development pressure matter, and the position in the market cycle? In England, planning was broadly easier outside the pressured and richer southern regions, where all political and policy debate risked being polarised between a driving development industry and a resistant and defensive non-urban population.
- What sort of understanding of a country or territory is needed, to facilitate such a Plan? Is an enduring “national imaginary” needed, or can a relatively low level consensus on functional issues underpin progress? Could a regional/national understanding reasonably exist in the absence of democratically elected institutions, as was tried in the English case? My guess is that, beyond the evidently critical political and professional drive, other factors of this type made possible the making of the Plan, in its present form. Some sort of consensus, however minimal, has to be reached on the territorial model desired.
- How important was the absence of a strong all Catalonia plan (the modest PTG)? Did this help, or hinder? Are such national plans always going to be very broad brush, and is that better? The Scottish National Planning Frameworks of 2004 and 2009 help us to think through these questions. They have enabled some sort of national conversation, the development of a national civic culture, though that is not to paper over deep differences in Scotland on many issues. In reality a sort of shadow PTG no doubt existed in 2003-2010, in the Criteris and political decisions on population and economy, which shows one effective approach to framing regional plans. An overarching spatial plan may not be essential, if other conditions are met.

So I repeat my congratulations to those responsible for the Plan, which I have watched progressing (or not) since the 1990s. May it have a fruitful life, developing and maturing. I look forward to seeing what effect revising the PTG may have on the set of seven regional plans in the coming years, alongside other political and economic pressures. The completion of a Plan is only ever a step, in some ways just another beginning.

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i P Allmendinger, 2011, *New Labour and Planning* (Abingdon: Routledge) gives an early assessment.

ii More on the achievements and the (in some ways serious) difficulties of the regional planning of the pre-2010 years will be found in a book to appear in 2012, edited by Corinne Swain and Tony Baden, including chapters by many of the skilled practitioners who ran the system.